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# On the Border of Participation: Spectatorship and the ‘Interactive Rituals’ of Guillermo Gómez-Peña and La Pocha Nostra

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**Abstract:** As the popularity of audience participation in contemporary performance continues to rise, this article examines the extraordinary form of spectatorship found in the work of Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s performance group La Pocha Nostra. The essay draws on the insights I have gained of their practice as both a spectator and collaborator, and how these experiences converge with critical concepts on participation, borderlines, and the emancipated spectator as outlined in Jacques Rancière’s writing. A primary concern is to investigate the way that participation invites a reconsideration of the borders between performer and spectator. This is explored with reference to theories regarding those that do and those that do not participate, and how this establishes a hierarchy amongst spectators, which includes what I call ‘expert participant-spectators’. I also offer an analogy between a participatory performance encounter and a one-night stand social encounter as a way of unravelling the mixed emotions that can follow a participatory experience, while taking into account the paradox of participation – the phenomenology of being both participant and spectator at the same time, and how this complicates reflection. The article determines that, although audience participation may collapse and re-orientate borders, participation yields its own limitations, as fresh borders are drawn up.

**Keywords:** Guillermo Gómez-Peña, La Pocha Nostra, audience participation, emancipated spectator, Jacques Rancière, live art

## The First Encounter

It is March 2003, Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s performance group La Pocha Nostra are performing their piece *Ex-Centris* as part of the *Live Culture* exhibition at the Tate Modern. *Ex-Centris* takes the form of a living museum of interactive dioramas, where intercultural bodies parody and subvert colonial modes of representa-

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tion. In the final section of the performance, Gómez-Peña asks audience members, “Is there anyone who is willing to co-create with me?”, as he initiates their infamous “human mural” exercise (119). Perhaps, as Adam Alston suggests, it was “hedonistic and narcissistic desire” that gave me the impulse to participate (130). But it was also with some trepidation that I left my fellow spectators and made my way to the raised performance platform. I knew that in crossing the border I had entered into an invisible contract and I was wary of them taking more than I was willing to give. I was thereupon greeted by a female La Pocha Nostra member, who quietly asked me if I would mind ‘losing’ some of my clothes. In the hours that preceded my crossing I had witnessed La Pocha Nostra’s aesthetic, and I felt a ‘special complicity’ with their work, to use Michael Fried’s term (127).<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, the idea of stripping off in public was both exhilarating and unnerving, and I felt compelled to retain some control over the situation. It was agreed that I would lose my top, but with the condition that I could put it back on whenever I wished. Beyond the border, I was beginning to draw up my own boundaries.

Over the duration of my encounter, an ever-evolving group of participants lost their clothes and to a greater extent their everyday identities as we improvised a series of shifting *tableaux vivants* in response to suggestions given by Gómez-Peña and the watching-spectators, which included a “Postcard to President Bush” and “The End of the World”. At last, Gómez-Peña declared that we had found the “final image”, and the diorama revealed my half-naked body, complete with Indian headdress, in a co-dependant pose with a naked female, who was wearing a Mexican hat and armed with a replica machine gun.<sup>2</sup> I recall the sensation and colour of her skin against mine, our difference all the more visible through our co-presence. In crossing the border I had been transformed into an Other; I had lost my clothes, my identity, and I was on the ‘other’ side of the performance.

Borders, both physical and conceptual, hold much significance for Gómez-Peña, and much of his art is in response to his own struggle crossing the boundary between Mexico and the US as well as challenging borders that exist politically, culturally and artistically. Audience participation in the work of La Pocha Nostra directly engages spectators with border politics, but, perhaps more significantly, the physical act of crossing the space between the audience and the performance is symbolic of border crossing more widely. While Gómez-Peña’s art originates from his own Latino perspective, it becomes localised for the audience of his practice, as they witness the border being brought into the mainland.

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1 See Alston (129) for an insightful account of Fried’s expression in relation to participation.

2 See photograph taken by Hugo Glendinning in Gómez-Peña (121).

By now a number of journalists and photographers had joined the large crowd of spectators. As my muscles strained to maintain the image, and with my gaze transfixed in the distance, a sea of cameras flashed and snapped: this was my ‘fifteen minutes’. And then the performance was over, and as I struggled to gather up both my thoughts and clothes, my fellow participants had dispersed into the crowd, beyond my recognition. In the ‘aftermath’ of the performance, I felt euphoric and transformed by my embodied knowledge.<sup>3</sup> However, this was shortly followed by a sense of loss and displacement, as I returned to the audience with the same status as before. Gómez-Peña writes that “[o]nce the performance is over and people walk away, my hope is that a process of reflection gets triggered in their perplexed psyches” (25). It is this process that underpins my analysis as I continue to wrestle with the complexities of my experience.

## Introduction

Since the turn of the millennium, there has been a sea change in the production of contemporary theatre and performance towards more participatory, interactive and immersive forms of spectatorship. In this article I want to look at the extraordinary form of spectatorship found in the ‘interactive rituals’ of Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s *La Pocha Nostra*.<sup>4</sup> These encounters epitomise the kind of audience participation that Gareth White defines as “exceptional”, and which “goes beyond” what we imagine that we should feel and do as a spectator (4). This essay draws on the insight I have gained through Spectator-Participation-as-Research (SPaR) from three audience perspectives: as a performing-spectator in *Ex-Centris* (2003); a watching-spectator in *Mapa/Corpo 2* (2006); and as a collaborator with the company in an untitled public performance at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Tucson, Arizona (2007).<sup>5</sup> The discussion explores these varying roles in what follows, revisiting my experiences through anecdotes and theorising their relationship to critical concepts on participation, borderlines and the emancipated spectator as outlined in Jacques Rancière’s writing. I begin by challenging the assumption that a participatory spectator is a more active and unbound

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘aftermath’ “is the long term consequences or follow-through of a performance”, as defined by Richard Schechner (19).

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘interactive rituals’ was employed by La Pocha Nostra in the Programme Notes for *Mapa/Corpo 2: Community Rituals for the New Millennium* (2007) to describe their participatory practice. *Mapa/Corpo 2* is part of the ongoing *Mapa/Corpo Series*.

<sup>5</sup> SPaR is the term used to define Deirdre Heddon, Helen Iball and Rachel Zerihan’s collaborative process of sharing their experiences of three participatory performances (122).

spectator. At the same time, I wish to elucidate the way that participation invites a reconsideration of the physical and symbolic borders that separate the performer and the spectator. My analysis explores the notion of spectator-participation as a form of practice, the mixed responses that it produces, and the potential for inequality amongst spectators as determined by those that do and those that do not participate. I also emphasise what I am calling the paradox of participation – the phenomenology of being both participant and spectator at the same time. This article looks to establish that, while audience participation may offer a vehicle for redefining or collapsing borders within contemporary performance, participation yields its own limitations, as fresh borders are drawn up.

The term ‘interactive rituals’ is indicative of the commonalities between participation and ritual, which are embodied in La Pocha Nostra’s practice. These rituals take the form of large-scale performance installations that occupy multiple spaces over a duration of approximately three to four hours, which enables the desired level of interaction to develop. As the audience steps into what Gómez-Peña calls a “total” environment (81), the fourth wall appears to be a very thin veil: the performers seem consciously aware of the spectators and often use direct address as well as encouraging interaction. During La Pocha Nostra’s performances the audience take on both subjective and objective roles within the work, as three modes of spectatorship are in operation. Firstly, there are performing-spectators; secondly, there are watching-directing-spectators, who offer suggestions during the human mural; and thirdly, there are those spectators who stand back and observe the spectacle. Typically, the climax comes at the end of the performance with the human mural, thus providing some of the most striking scenes of spectator-participation in contemporary performance.

## The Border Politics of Participation

A democratising of the arts has long since been the rhetoric of participation. However, this has become an area of some contention, and one that has been challenged most notably by Rancière, whose writing disputes the presupposition that a participant-spectator is an emancipated spectator. Rancière notes that the crossing of borders, specifically the space between the performer and the spectator, is a defining characteristic of theatre and contemporary art today (“Emancipated Spectator” 280). He observes that this has arisen out of the established opposition between looking and knowing, which supposes that in traditional forms of theatre the looking-spectator is passive and therefore powerless (“Emancipated Spectator” 272). Rancière maintains that the main focus of dramaturges is to get the spectator to do something, to move from being passive to active, even if

they do not know exactly what they want the spectator to do (“Emancipated Spectator” 277). As an alternative to crossing borders, he proposes that we should rethink the value awarded to the oppositional relations on which theatre experiences are based:

What makes it possible to pronounce the spectator seated in her place inactive, if not the previously posited radical opposition between the active and the passive? [...] These oppositions – viewing / knowing, appearance / reality, activity / passivity – are quite different from logical oppositions between clearly defined terms. [...] They are embodied allegories of inequality. That is why we can change the value of the terms, transform a ‘good’ term into a ‘bad’ one and vice versa, without altering the functioning of the opposition itself. (*Emancipated Spectator* 12)

The structure of this opposition, as Rancière advises, creates two categories – those who possess a capacity and those who do not. This is an arrangement that is arguably replicated by the division of participating and non-participating spectators, which I will return to later. Emancipation, as Rancière would have it, emerges out of a principle of equality between the two sides, beginning with challenging the opposition between looking and acting. He notes, “The spectator also acts, like the pupil or scholar. She observes, selects, compares, interprets. [...] She participates in the performance by refashioning it in her own way – [...]. They are thus both distant spectators and active interpreters of the spectacle offered to them” (*Emancipated Spectator* 13). Following Rancière, a non-performing-spectator may be actively participating in a performance precisely because of their distance. In this way, the border gives them the space to make connections between the staged reality and their own life.

Indeed, according to David Beech, the participant-spectator, rather than being cast as an emancipated spectator, may be more under the artist’s control than from a distant position (25). Reflecting on my experience of *Ex-Centris*, on the one hand, I was emancipated from a single physically inactive position, as the promenade form allowed me to wander freely and to find my own experience. Moreover, during the human mural I was physically elevated by the staging and invited to co-create in the action of the performance. On the other hand, I was creating within the parameters set out by La Pocha Nostra. To help articulate the debates surrounding participation and a democratising of the arts, I turn to Erika Fischer-Lichte’s *The Transformative Power of Performance*. She contends that “[it] is essential to ask whether role reversal establishes a community of co-subjects or merely recreates the old relationship in a new guise” (40). In the performances of La Pocha Nostra, authorship is shared with spectators, but it eventually returns to the company, as they have the last say on the final image. However, I also want to acknowledge that these ‘interactive rituals’ epitomise Fischer-Lichte’s notion that

the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators has the capacity to destabilise the dichotomous subject-object relationship and re-establish the bond between the aesthetic, social and political in performance (43–44). This is made most explicit during the human mural, where highly theatrical costuming and props are utilised by a community of performing-spectators to create a series of politically potent and frequently transgressive images. The transformative potential for mutual physical contact between performers and spectators to re-orientate borders resonates strongly with the motivations of habitual border-crossers like Gómez-Peña and his *La Pocha Nostra* ‘compadres’. In that moment when the spectator accepts the invitation to co-create, it can be perceived that “[t]he border turns into a frontier and a threshold, which does not separate but connects [...] collapsing binary oppositions and replacing the notion of ‘either/or’ with one of ‘as well as’” (Fischer-Lichte 204). The inclusivity implied by Fischer-Lichte’s analysis is embodied in the ‘irresistible images’ that *La Pocha Nostra*’s methodology encourages, with re-occurring themes such as gender-bending, ethnic-bending, sexual pluralism and cross-culturalism.<sup>6</sup> As Gómez-Peña tells us, “The space between self and other, us and them, fear and desire, becomes blurred and unspecific. It becomes ground zero in intercultural relations” (85).

It would appear that the theories of Rancière and Fischer-Lichte converge to offer a fluid notion of the relationship between borders and spectatorship. Where Fischer-Lichte advocates that borders should be turned into thresholds that connect the spectator to the transformative possibilities of performance, Rancière sees the border as providing the necessary critical distance for the spectator to experience freedom of interpretation and to make connections with the action. While *La Pocha Nostra*’s use of participation in many ways personifies Fischer-Lichte’s critique, I would wish to stress that their ‘interactive rituals’ also address Rancière’s viewpoint by acknowledging the role of the watching-spectator as a form of participation. Open or closed, threshold or barrier, active or passive, by applying the shared principles of Rancière, Fischer-Lichte and Gómez-Peña and replacing ‘either/or’ with ‘as well as’, we may allow for the possibility that borders are capable of cultivating more than one kind of emancipated spectator.

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<sup>6</sup> The term ‘irresistible image’ was coined by Larry M. Bogad to distinguish a compelling, strange or surprising image that artists and activists create in public confrontation (see Bogad).

## The Second Encounter

It is June 2006, La Pocha Nostra are closing the PSi Conference on Performing Rights with their performance *Mapa/Corpo 2: Community Rituals for the New Millennium*. From a lectern Gómez-Peña blesses his space with ‘sacred spray’, then drinks from a detergent bottle labelled ‘Mr Clean’, which he spits out at the audience. Addressing spectators he poignantly asks:

Where is the border between you and me?  
Between my words and your mind?  
Between my mouth and your fears?  
Where exactly is this performance taking place? (204)

The speech is followed by a series of interactive dioramas. The first invites spectators to decolonise the naked body of a female performer by removing acupuncture needles that each display a miniature US flag. The second offers founding member Roberto Sifuentes as the centrepiece for a ‘human alter’: disabled by a leg brace and bandaged groin, he is at the mercy of the spectators, who have been urged by Gómez-Peña to write a response to the future of civilisation on his body. Once more, as the performance nears its conclusion Gómez-Peña makes his request, “Is there anyone who is willing to co-create with me?”, and the human mural begins. This time I remain as a watching-spectator.

As a series of *tableaux vivants* unfold, a white middle-aged male enters the performance zone; he strips off, leaving only his glasses on. Next a black thirty-something woman crosses the border; she pulls down her skirt to reveal her bottom. Time and time again Gómez-Peña searches for that elusive final image. Eventually the image is found, but only to be lost again a few minutes later, and the transient community disperses as quickly as it united. Participants get dressed, discuss their experience with friends, and in a somewhat euphoric and slightly displaced state make the journey home.

My position as a watching-spectator did afford me greater freedom of interpretation; however, the experience was not as compelling as my first ‘felt’ encounter. Nevertheless, this is not to say that watching-spectators are passive in La Pocha Nostra’s practice; on the contrary, their looking is recognised as a form of interaction, as they are encouraged to act as co-directors and auditors of the emerging *tableaux vivants* through their suggestions and affirmation. And during these occasions, the watching-directing-spectator, observed by Gómez-Peña and the remaining onlookers, momentarily becomes a performing-spectator. I must concede that as a watching-spectator, I may have engaged further with the performance if I had been more communicative during the human mural process. If there is a main principle for spectatorship in La Pocha Nostra’s ‘interactive

rituals', and arguably any form of participatory practice, it is this: the more that is given in participation, the more that is taken in participation, for both the artist and the spectator.

## Spectator-Participation as Practice

Spectator-participation is its own form of practice, and one that has become increasingly more specialised and demanding alongside the escalating ambitions and innovations of artists working with participation. Yet it can be said that for many audience members, participation is a love it or hate it mode of spectatorship. And even if one is more inclined to love it, there may still be times when one does not want to participate. Alexander García Düttmann in conversation with Karoline Gritzner maintains that this resistance to participation derives from the fact that it does not come naturally and requires making an effort (136), a situation that is exasperated by a further contradiction of wishing to participate at the same time as wanting to be left alone. As García Düttmann points out: "We don't want to be alone, we want to be with others so that we can escape our own stupidity, and yet for that very reason, because we want to escape our stupidity, we also want to be left alone and not be with others" (137).

I am reminded of those moments where I have stood on the border of participation and debated whether or not to volunteer. In my first encounter with La Pocha Nostra, the impulse to participate, to be with others, overwhelmed my fear of stupidity. In my second encounter I felt less persuaded to participate; I was not sure what I had to gain a second time around, and I was wary of the 'hang-over' that had followed my previous hedonistic activity. In the film documentation of *Live Culture* (2003), produced by the Live Art Development Agency, I am captured after my participation in *Ex-Centris* looking timid and self-conscious as I attempt to get dressed. The frame of performance had given me licence to behave in ways that were otherwise outside of my everyday identity, but once the performance was over, I was left to contemplate and take responsibility for the consequences of my actions.

In light of this, and as a strategy for unravelling spectator's mixed emotions post-performance, I would like to draw an analogy between a participatory performance encounter and a one-night stand social encounter. Firstly, the motivations of hedonism and narcissism, cited by Alston, are frequently the impulse for both forms of interaction. In the case of the one-night stand, these desires are often fuelled by alcohol, as impaired judgement is known to lead to more risky behaviour. In this respect, it is worth noting that alcohol is frequently given



special provision in participatory practice, with the bar offering further opportunities for interaction in both Punchdrunk's *The Drowned Man* (2014) and Secret Cinema's recent *The Empire Strikes Back* (2015) event. Secondly, a need for physical intimacy is palpable in both forms of encounter. Indeed, one of the complaints made about participation is dissatisfaction at the level of intimacy achieved, which is frequently less than expected and sought after, although not necessarily less than what was promised. Again, there is a parallel here with the one-night stand as a social exchange, where intimacy can be intense, and at the same time short-lived, insincere, or even non-existent if both parties are not fully engaged. Thirdly, the environment and events leading up to both participation in performance and a one-night stand regularly create a heightened state that lifts the individual from their everyday reality and lessens their inhibitions. The immersive element emphasised in participatory practice is largely produced through the "in-its-own-worldness" quality, as defined by Josephine Machon (93), which frequently makes use of lighting and sound design to enhance the *mise-en-scène* or "total" environment (Gómez-Peña 81). One-night stands are known to develop out of social contexts such as parties, nightclubs and bars, where the setting has been refined to enhance the atmosphere – again lighting and sound are prominent strategies here. As Alexander Lambert suggests, these recreational enclaves can be seen to possess liminal qualities, like their ability to produce spontaneous social interaction between strangers (119) akin to the spectator-to-spectator contact produced by participation. Yet, as Lambert reminds us, drawing on Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure (Foundations of Human Behavior)* (1969), liminal moments are transitory and quickly dissolve when we resume our everyday life (119). This brings me to the final point of comparison, which I will refer to as 'the morning after (the night before)', a popular phrase recalled after an evening of drinking, whereupon the participant is left to face their hangover and the significances of their actions. Like those waking up from a one-night stand, participant-spectators can have mixed emotions following their activities, which may include euphoria, embarrassment and regret. There can also be a similar feeling of social awkwardness when one happens upon a performer or fellow participant outside of the context of one's experience, especially if they do not acknowledge you. Though participatory practice may appear to respond to the desire for intimacy and a 'real' encounter, it is, in the end, a performance.

For many, a participatory performance encounter is literally a one-night experience, in the way that it is not something to be repeated, either because you know that it will not be as exciting the second time around, or because you did not like how it made you feel the first time. For some, this will motivate them to look for other participatory experiences, but for others, once is enough. Occasion-

ally, however, one-night stands develop into love affairs and relationships, and participation does produce devotee participant-spectators, as evident in the ‘superfans’ of Punchdrunk’s work.

While a reluctance to participate is certainly true for some spectators, the opposite is the case for an increasing number of audience members. As Gómez-Peña observes, “[a]udiences are increasingly having a harder time just sitting and passively watching a performance, especially younger audiences. [...] They see themselves as ‘insiders’ and part-time artists. [...] These new audience members are always ready to walk on stage at any invitation from the artist and do something” (54). This notion of spectators as part-time artists can usefully be developed in the context of Alston’s concept of ‘entrepreneurial participation’ and what I call ‘expert participant-spectators’.

Alston coins the term ‘entrepreneurial participation’ to identify a kind of participation found in immersive theatre based on self-made opportunity (128). He suggests that those audience members with experience, who actively hunt out participatory encounters, such as the elusive one-to-ones in a Punchdrunk piece, are more likely to reap the rewards (133). In the wake of the recent proliferation of participatory performance practices, the gap between the artist as a professional and the participant-spectator as an amateur has closed. Increasingly, expert participant-spectators can be seen taking a key role in realising the intended aesthetic of participation. They may even be called upon by the artist if the interaction is in need of artistic intervention. These individuals have developed the knowledge of participation and the requisite techniques to improvise and reciprocate at will. It should also be noted that when Gómez-Peña tells us that audience members see themselves as ‘insiders’, in some instances they *are* ‘insiders’. This is because contemporary performance, and more specifically Live Art, typically attracts a specialist audience, a detail that has most certainly not been lost on the makers of participatory practice. One of the most infamous examples of an expert participant-spectator is the viral video of Ulay participating in Marina Abramović’s *The Artist is Present* (2010) at New York’s Museum of Modern Art, which received over fourteen million views on YouTube.

Beech, following Rancière, maintains that rather than being inclusive, audience participation can be socially divisive, as a new economy of exchange separates people into those who are “participation-rich” and those who are “participation-poor” (25). This social division amongst spectators is made visible in La Pocha Nostra’s practice through their use of staging, which frequently includes raised platforms, but can also take the form of an ‘ephemeral stage’. These defined performance spaces magnify and draw attention to audience participation, most significantly the way that boundaries can be crossed and power relations reinterpreted. However, the use of staging also separates and

elevates, sometimes literally, the performing-spectators from the watching-spectators. In this way, although spectator-participation may challenge the established hierarchy of artist over audience, a new social structure between spectators is created.

It is my belief that the distinction between those that do and those that do not participate can produce a myriad of conflicting reactions in the watching-spectators. These audience responses include, but are not limited to: jealousy that participating-spectators are in a more rarefied position and one which affords them special knowledge; relief that someone else has volunteered, diverting the pressure to perform; anxiety that a non-professional has been given a position of authority and may not be up to the job; excitement at the spontaneity and risks implied; empathy, as those interacting were formerly one of us and will be again; inadequacy for not being brave or talented enough to partake; admiration for participants' courage and ability to perform; regret and self-reproach for not participating when one knows that one could/should have; shock that real people would be willing to get up on stage and take their clothes off in front of strangers. It is likely that some watching-spectators will experience a number of these sensations while witnessing participation, which further complicates their relationship to the work. Of course, the role of the watching-directing-spectator in *La Pocha Nostra's* performances gives onlookers a chance to regain some power back from the performing-spectators, without having to cross the border.

## The Third Encounter

It is August 2007, and I am sitting on a plane on my way to Tucson, Arizona. I am about to embark on a 10-day rehearsal process with *La Pocha Nostra*, culminating in a performance at the MOCA in Tucson. It is during this performance that I experience spectator-participation from the other side of the border. As I look out into the sea of spectators, to the familiar cry of Gómez-Peña asking, "Is there anyone who is willing to co-create with me?", my eyes settle on a young woman in a white floral dress with a green bow in her hair. It was with some trepidation that she left her male companion and took my hand. I am wearing a Marilyn Monroe inspired blonde wig, diamanté drop earrings, and red painted lips; however, in contrast, my right eye is blackened, my body is bruised, there is an image of a bleeding heart on my chest, and suggestively the words "destrucción masiva" (mass destruction) are written down my back. Gómez-Peña claims that over the course of their methodology, participants can "become artistically extroverted within a week" (135). In the photographs of the MOCA performance, I am quite

unrecognisable from the person in the images from *Ex-Centris*. While bare chested in both, I feel less exposed in the role of performer, as my status is fixed and I am able to relinquish responsibility at the point in which I wash off my bleeding heart and leave my persona behind.

By and large, this was not an audience of expert participant-spectators; they were members of the local community, who had mostly read in the newspaper that a free public performance was taking place in their hometown. Gómez-Peña appeared to be sensitive to this non-art audience and the demands that he could place on them; thus, there was less nudity, and the company supported performer-spectators by improvising alongside them. The young woman with the green bow in her hair's lack of expertise quickly became apparent, as she looked to me to take the lead. What one sees in the documentation of our exchange is a series of images where we are holding each other, and in two of the photographs we are further bound together with rope. These are not images of an emancipated spectator; her physicality appears to be more passive than active. There is no role reversal, as I feel a responsibility for her in performance, and the only point in which she lets go of me is at the moment of departure from the human mural. She remains in her original dress throughout the performance; therefore, the transformative effect of her participation is somewhat limited and a disparity in our roles is magnified through the costuming, or in her case lack of. Yet the recognition of our difference, founded in mutual physical contact, actually established a much closer relationship than usually found between performer and spectator, which is strikingly apparent in the documentation. I am once again reminded of my connection to the naked female in the Mexican hat from *Ex-Centris*. In the photograph of the young woman with the green bow leaving the performance she has a hand over her mouth, in what might be perceived as shock, sudden realisation or sadness – whatever the impetus, she appears to have been visibly moved by her experience. It is owing to the documentation that I also recognise that she is wearing a black rucksack throughout the improvisation; the decision not to leave it behind perhaps implies an unwillingness to lose her previous identity and audience-ness, and to remain on my side of the border. She is in transit, neither performer nor spectator, but somewhere between the two positions. This duality brings me to what I will refer to as the paradox of participation.

## The Paradox of Participation

The paradox of participation is that as participant-spectators we appear to be on both sides of the border at the same time. It is this notion that presents one of the

biggest challenges for the analysis of participation, while also offering a unique vantage point from which to reflect on performance. Even though participation can offer an exciting experience, as García Düttmann suggests, it places the spectator in the predicament of occupying two mutually exclusive positions, inside and outside of the performance. Our own self-awareness of what we are doing during participation means that “consciousness is always somewhere else” (136), and in realising this conflict we may become even more self-aware. It was precisely this simultaneous occupying of both the performer and the audience role in *Ex-Centris* that complicated my reading of the work during and post-performance. The self-awareness, albeit unconscious, of looking in the midst of doing, informed the way that I operated within the improvisation. As White explains, “the participant is simultaneously the performer, the one who enacts the performance through choice, the performance that emerges from their own body and the audience as they view it” (161). The periods of stillness, when the final image was being viewed by Gómez-Peña, the watching-spectators and the photographers, provided the space to see myself reflected in their eyes. However, after the event, my embodied experience overwhelmed my ability to critique the performance. While I felt closer to the practice and its ideology, it was at the cost of losing my critical distance. Indeed, writing about participation is one way in which I have been attempting to reconcile my experience. What is more, I have noted an increasing trend amongst academics in the field of participation to use a combination of first-person accounts alongside conventional scholarly writing. This would appear to replicate in some way the duality of our role within the performance, demanding a two-pronged analysis of our embodied knowledge from both inside and outside of the work. Though we may not be unbound during participation itself, the embodied nature of these encounters transforms the spectator into a narrator of their own experience. Perhaps, as Ranci re tells us, “[a]n emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers” (“Emancipated Spectator” 280).

In conclusion, participation as exemplified in the work of La Pocha Nostra re-orientates borders and unsettles the dichotomies on which narrow perceptions of performance are founded, most notably the subject-object relationship and the notion of looking and doing. However, the paradox of participation is that the border that separates the artist from the spectator can never be fully crossed because we are unable to completely abandon our role as the audience. It is also apparent that as some borders shift, others take their place, such as the personal boundaries set by participant-spectators, or the divisions between the modes of spectatorship. Nonetheless, I suggest that it is the opening up of the border between the spectator and the performer that gives participation its *raison d’ tre*. For it is in this liminal space that the transformative power of performance may

be revealed, and where you can find yourself half-naked and wearing an Indian headdress.

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## Bionote

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Kelly Jordan is a Senior Lecturer in Drama in the School of Arts at De Montfort University. She is currently developing a series of research projects focused upon audience participation in Live Art

and contemporary theatre, drawing on her personal experiences alongside critical concepts and debates. In addition, she is co-directing an immersive theatre reconstruction of a night at the *flicks* in the 1960s, to be performed at a number of cinemas across the UK. Kelly has previously worked as a theatre director, establishing her own company and staging performances at venues such as Hoxton Hall and the Ministry of Sound in London. She has also performed with Guillermo Gómez-Peña's performance company La Pocha Nostra.